

EngLit 1699
Fall 2005
Bishop, E.

Science Fiction Film
crn: 13940 L1699
Fall 2005
Wednesday 6-9:50 pm
Lawrn 207
Dr Ellen Bishop
438CL
ebishop@pitt.edu

Course Description

According to Issac Asimov, Science Fiction as a literary genre began with the publication of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, in 1818. He equates SF with the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent 200 years or so of unprecedented scientific and technological growth that continue today. SF as a film genre began at the turn of the twentieth century with Melies' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), although it did not become a major film genre until after WWII (until after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), somewhere around 1950. French philosopher Michel Foucault and Marxist theorist, Fredric Jameson, have both independently suggested that the post WWII era that began around 1950 was also the time when our cultural dominant shifted from modern to postmodern, from an industrial culture to the postindustrial, global society we live in now.

What then are the connections between the emergence of SF as a major film genre and the move from an industrial modernist age—the age that had engendered SF as a literary form—to a postindustrial, postmodernist one? In order to explore this question we will approach the SF film genre since 1950 from three perspectives: as a genre that offers cultural criticism, as a genre that questions the conventional self/ other distinctions of western philosophy (and psychology), and as a genre that asks the “big” questions about the nature and knowability of reality in our post-secularist age.

In addition to this, the concept of SF as the genre of spectacle will run like a thread through all the films and essays and our discussions.

Films and Readings

Cultural Critique

- 8/31/05 *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise 1951)
9/07/05 *1984* (Michael Radford 1984)
clips from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang 1927)
readings: Sobchack chapter 1, SFR page 50
- 9/14/05 *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam 1985)
clips from *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam 1995)
clips from *1984* (Michael Radford 1984)
readings: Sobchack Chapter 2, SFR page 344
- 9/21/05 *Robocop* (Paul Verhoven 1987)
clips from *Forbidden Planet* (Fred Wilcox 1956)
" " *Tobor the Great* (Lee Sholem 1954)
clips from *The Terminator* (James Cameron 1984)
readings: Sobchack chapter 3

Aliens R Us

- 9/28/05 *Invaders From Mars* (William Cameron Menzies 1953)
clips from *Forbidden Planet* (Fred Wilcox 1956)
clips from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg 1977)
readings: Sobchack chapter 4 pgs. 223-281, SFR page 60
- 10/05/05 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel 1956)
clips from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kauffman 1978)
readings: Sobchack chapter 4 pgs. 281-305, SFR page 132
- 10/12/05 *Alien* (Ridley Scott 1979) ~~readings: SFR page 335~~
- 10/19/05 *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982) ~~readings: SFR page 280~~
clips from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang 1927)
- 11/26/05 *Repo Man* (Alex Cox 1984)
clips from *The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai Across the 8th Dimension* (W. D. Richter 1984)
- 11/02/05 *The Brother From Another Planet* (John Sayles 1984)

Big Questions

- 11/09/05 *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold 1957)
clips from *Rebel Without a Cause* (Vincente Minelli 1955)

- readings: SFR page 68
 11/16/05 *2001 Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick 1968)
 readings: SFR page 178, essay page 181
 11/30/05 *Signs* (M. Night Shyamalan 2002)
 Readings: SFR: "Signs of Spiritual Life (or Why You Are the Alien Species)" Read
 Mercer Schuchardt
 12/07/05 *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski 1999)
 Readings: SFR: "The Matrix or the Two Sides of Perversion"
 Slavoj Zizek

Required Books

Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film Vivian Sobchack

This book is an overview of American SF film from the 1950's through *Star Wars* in 1977. The first three chapters are organized by topic—definitions of the genre, the "look" of the SF film, and the sound of SF. Because it is organized by these topics (and many subtopics), the chapters jump around in time mentioning an enormous number of films. These chapters are fairly straight forward and easy to read although there is a lot of information packed into them.

The fourth chapter was written 10 years after the first three and is a re-evaluation of the whole genre in light of the SF "renaissance" that was just beginning when *Star Wars* and Industrial Light and Magic came on the scene in the late 70's. This chapter is much denser than the first three and will require re-reading on your part. We will be unpacking and using the ideas in this chapter throughout the course. It would be a good idea for you to read the material as it is scheduled and then to move back to it as our discussions do throughout the rest of the term.

The Science Fiction Reader ed. Gregg Rickman (SFR)

This book is a selection of contemporary readings about many of the films we will be screening in class. The readings range from short interviews with directors and authors, to longer more complex essays that work through interesting connections between SF as a film genre and our postmodern moment.

Required Essays

"Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" Fredric Jameson
 Chapter Two of **The End of Poverty** Jeffrey Sachs

Student Responsibilities

You are expected to come to class on time, to stay until the class is over and to participate in class discussions. This participation will be evaluated in terms of quality rather than simply quantity. In other words, you do not have to be the most extroverted, talkative person in the class to do well in participation. Its more a matter of your engagement with the conversation, the texts in question and the issues we are raising in our discussions. If you have consistently been engaged with the class discussions throughout the term and your grade is "on the fence" at the end of the semester, you will receive the higher grade.

Absences will negatively influence your grade. One absence will be excused, no questions asked. I would like to hear from you however and I will expect you to contact a classmate to get the notes on what you missed in the class discussion and any presentations done in the class you missed.

Students are expected to treat each other and me with thoughtfulness and respect. I will do the same. Disagreement is a vital part of the learning process and college classrooms are great places for the exchange of ideas and perspectives. It is also a mark of ethical intelligence to be willing and able to change your mind if new evidence or new perspectives call your old perspectives into question. However, it is also important to keep our discussions collegial in the best sense of that term. In other words, it is important to choose your words carefully, and to consider the dignity and perspectives of other members of the class especially when and if we are involved in discussions of difficult issues.

Plagiarism is not an option in this university and will not be tolerated in this class. You will be expected to use and cite source materials in your papers. When in doubt as to whether or not you should cite a source: DO IT.

The English department defines plagiarism as follows:

Plagiarism

When a student presents as his/her own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or works of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgement of sources;

When a student submits work of another person in a manner which represents the work to be his/her own;

When a student knowingly permits his/her work to be submitted by another person without the instructor's authorization.

If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism or what will happen to you if you are caught plagiarizing, please consult the university policy which you can find from the University home page.

Special Needs

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me and Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890 or 412-383-7355 (TTY) as early as possible in the term.

Major Class Assignments

1. **Online Responses**—Students will be required to post online (in Blackboard) responses to the feature films we screen each week by the following Saturday morning at noon.. Comments on clips from other films are also welcome. These responses are meant to be informal, but thoughtful and should engage with the film and the readings and class discussions. They should be fairly specific and offer some explanations for why the student sees the film as he or she does. So, it's fine to begin with "I liked/didn't like this film," but the responses should move from that to an explanation of why or why not that displays some critical insight into the narrative, cinematic and cultural aspects of the film. Two paragraphs to a page (or more). These will be graded on a check plus, check, and check minus scale. Students can miss one with no penalty. At the end of the term they will collectively be assigned one of the three grades (by averaging) and folded into the final course grade for 20% of it.

2. **Student Class Responders** Every week 3 students will begin the class discussion of the featured film from the previous week. Students will be asked to sign up for their week beginning with the first class (for the following week). Their responses for the class discussion should be designed to raise questions and focus the class's attention on interesting points about the film and to present an initial position on it that addresses the issues of its generic qualities, its cinematic qualities, and some speculation on its connection to its cultural moment. Responders can confer during the week with each other and with me if they so desire. They can also bring talking notes if they wish. 20% of final grade (see

3. **Final Papers**—Students will be required to write a final paper on a film of their own choosing (as long as we have not analyzed it in class). This paper should be a careful analysis of the film that demonstrates a critical understanding of how to read the science fictionality of the film in terms of its postmodern moment as we will have been doing all semester. This paper should also demonstrate the student's ability to closely read a scene (or two) in a film and use that reading as evidence to support their argument.

These papers will be 40% of your final grade.

The remaining 20% of your grade will be for class participation.

Your papers should have cover pages with your name, the date, the paper title and the name of the course on it. Please also number your pages, use space and a half spacing on the standard iMac (the middle choice), standard margins, a standard font style, and size 12 point.

Holistic Grading Rubric for Writing Assignments

"A" Paper

Excellent. Thesis is very well defined and original; solid reasoning throughout; aware of subject's complexities; sources used properly and effectively; excellent grammar; good paragraph structure, excellent format and presentation.

"B" Paper

Strong. Thesis is clearly defined; valid reasoning through most of the paper; perhaps contains some unsubstantiated generalizations; adequate grammar and diction; some relatively minor mechanical errors.

"C" Paper

Average. Thesis is somewhat clear, but may be too general; supporting discussions can be, at times, repetitious and unfocused; reasoning is at times vague, inconsistent mechanics.

"D" Paper

Problematic. Central idea is vague and/or confusing; supporting discussions are under developed, repetitive, redundant; reasoning is often inaccurate or flawed; several incoherent paragraphs; poor grammar and presentation.

"F" Paper

Fundamentally deficient. Thesis is wholly unclear; supporting discussions may be completely absent or unclear; chaotic organization and paragraph structure; largely deficient grammar.